

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE *

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THE Schilder Society, as you know, is a descendant and a continuation of an analogous society in Vienna, Austria, whose foundation was inspired by Paul Schilder in 1922. I was present at those beginnings, took an active part in the proceedings, and I cherish the memory of intellectual and spiritual stimulation emanating from Paul Schilder.

The historical situation in Vienna of those years created a climate particularly favorable for the study of problems that will occupy us this evening. The disintegration of the Hapsburg monarchy, coming in the wake of World War I, had released powerful social forces and was accompanied by a veritable social and political revolution. Aggression and violence were breaking loose in a country impoverished by the long war and the crushing defeat.

Schilder had a keen eye for all social and political events, and he brought to their study the insights offered by the new psychology being elaborated by Sigmund Freud. Indeed, problems of aggression had occupied him ever since, and he devoted to them many studies, at first alone and then, after moving to the United States, with his co-workers here. He wrote on aggression in children, in man, and in woman; on the impact of cultural factors and ideologies; on aggression in self-defense; and on aggression as related to the openings of the body.

We live in an age of violence, of wars, of the extermination of millions for reasons of perverted racial doctrine and fanatical ideology.

Obviously we are most impressed by events of our own epoch, yet a glance at the past shows that destructive violence was prominent in various periods of history. We may not necessarily agree with all the conclusions of Robert Ardrey, the author of *African Genesis* that

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. . . man had emerged from the anthropoid background for one reason only: because he was a killer. Long ago, perhaps many millions of years ago, a line of killer apes branched off from the non-aggressive primate background. . . . From this branch of apes man emerged with the fashioning of the first true weapons: Far from the truth lay the antique assumption that man had fathered the weapon. The weapon instead had fathered man.¹

Yet, we must agree that the course of human history seems to be in accord with this thesis, starting from the first chapters of Genesis with the story of Cain and Abel until our own time. In fact, the prohibition of wanton murder in all the moral and religious codes has never prevented homicide from being advocated in the course of history for various reasons, even for the sake of the salvation of the soul. Both facts, the strict prohibition and the breaking through of the homicidal wish, under various disguises and rationalizations, testify to the powerful impact of this repressed drive. We even have reasons to connect it genetically with the primitive cannibalism.

The history of the Holy Inquisition, the persecution of the Cathari, the Albigeois, and all the other religious wars, were worthy predecessors of Stalin's purges and labor camps, and of Hitler's elaborate system of mass extermination.

In an attempt to survey problems of such complexity I shall leave aside the obscure problem of the derivation of the aggressive drive. I shall return to it briefly at the conclusion of this presentation.

By and large, modern psychiatry follows the dualistic doctrine of the founder of psychoanalysis. Eros and Neikos, love and strife, had been postulated as two basic principles already at about 450 B.C. by Empedocles of Akragas.

As a first approach I suggest the division of the phenomena of destructive aggression, according to their origin, into two large groups.

Violent hostility arises in an individual either spontaneously or as a result of an example, indoctrination and, more simply, introjection, that is, absorption of evil, as it were, from the environment.

Obviously, there are situations and configurations in which the child is taught to hate and to use violence as a guiding principle of behavior. This indoctrination may have various origins in familial or social pathology and ideology. We have every reason to believe that in the wake of a protracted war, crimes of violence are on the increase.

The same is true in periods of violent social upheaval.

Claude Brown describes in his autobiography, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, how his father taught him violence as a way of survival in the dark ghetto.²

Any fanatical political or ideological indoctrination is usually accompanied by the praise of violence. Here any means is laudable as long as it helps to destroy the adversary. Very often, and we know it only too well from past and recent history, the latter is represented as a deadly enemy so as to make him an object of wrath and destruction.

In the course of individual development we see hostility emerging in the service of the process of individuation.

The ego of the child is at first nonexistent, being undistinguishable from that of the mother: in due time it crystallizes gradually out of this original, so-called dyadic unity. In the course of this process it might be threatened by many factors, yet one of the most important seems to be the symbiotic wish of the mother or, far less frequently, of the father. This symbiotic wish finds its counterpart in the child who, along with his desire for emancipation, does not give up easily the wish to maintain the original unity.³

Thus, the increase of hostility at certain turning points of development must be considered as normal.

However, under certain conditions, hostility overwhelms the growing but weak ego and may lead to acts of violence and destruction. This might occur on the basis of such psychopathology as is characteristic of the so-called weak, fluid ego boundaries, for instance, in the clinical group of the schizophrenias.

Here even the individual's own wish to be loved, and the call for love issuing from the other person might be experienced as a threat to the ego which, without being aware, craves just for the very same fusion and complete merging which it consciously abhors.

Some typical erotic constellations may favor such a discharge of hostility. Here belong also various aspects of the oedipal conflict.

Certain acts of violence occur as a defense against the threats of breaking deeply ingrained moral taboos, such as the prohibition of incest or a homosexual gratification.

In attacking the person who, quite unbeknown to himself, mobilizes in him these dangerous and, therefore, repressed ego-alien impulses, the attacker denies and repudiates them vehemently. Periods of biological

and, consequently, psychological crisis such as adolescence or menopause might create a particularly favorable background for such reactions.

However, long after the symbiotic relationship has been abandoned, there may exist a psychological situation where the original object of ambivalent love—I call such objects love-hate objects—has become incorporated, as it were, in the unconscious ego of the individual. An emotional situation developing between the latter and a new object of strong emotional involvement may evoke old ambivalence with the consequent desire to get rid of the introject, that is, of the incorporated image of the original love-hate object. Under such dynamic conditions there may occur acts of destructive violence.

Various clinical conditions favor such violent acting out: psychopathy, schizophrenia, epilepsy, and epileptoidy, and, of course, alcoholism, and the addictions. More recently with the advent of the psychomimetic drugs, the use of LSD has been known as an immediate precipitating cause of acts of violence.

Generally speaking, it is important to note at this point that the shifting from destruction in phantasy to violence in action is an event of extreme importance and that it is predicated upon a great number of variables. After all, we must be aware that only a small fraction of destructive phantasies that we know to exist in children and in adolescents and that we observe in our psychoanalytic patients becomes acted out in reality.

Frustrations, oppression, and humiliation in the sensitive period of development contribute to the emergence of reactive hostility. If the original love-hate object is the source of such experiences, then it naturally remains invested with a charge of hostility.

Situations that are directly or symbolically reminiscent of these early deprivations, persons who directly or indirectly evoke the image of the frustrating parent, become a target for destructive hostility. We may say that in such an act the individual attempts to destroy the original love-hate object, as it were, in absentia; or, to use a terminology that I introduced in a former publication, we may describe the aggressive act as an episode in the struggle against the introject.⁴

A great variety of destructive acts may be explained by this mechanism. Their variety is due to the multiplicity of etiological factors and to the richness of unconscious orchestration of the original hostile impulses.

In my doctoral dissertation, *The Psychopathology of Pyromania*, I described a number of individuals of varied clinical classification whose destructive impulses found their outlet in arson.⁵

In the variety of motivations there prevailed a unique combination of a frustrated erotic drive and thwarted primitive aggression. The act of arson appeared, by and large, as a symbolic expression of the destructive wish directed toward a frustrating love object or a generally frustrating life situation. An unrequited erotic wish could be detected under the relatively thin camouflage of symbolism or rationalization.

With my attention directed to these problems, I could demonstrate in the structure of a destructive act by an incipient schizophrenic the combination of symbolism and of a short-circuit compulsive reaction.

This young man was sent for a forensic evaluation to the famous Burghölzli where, at that time, under the direction of Eugen Bleuler, the creator of the concept of schizophrenia, I was serving my psychiatric apprenticeship. The time was the fourth year of World War I. The patient, a quiet and unobtrusive white-collar worker, had posted himself in bright daylight before the window of the Swiss Credit Bank in Zurich, Switzerland, and had smashed it with a stone.

Our explorations revealed that he was opposed to the war, and since, according to him, the war was being promoted by the capitalists, in his act he intended to attack the capitalist system. As you see, this primitive act of protest is reminiscent of contemporary vandalism; yet, it seems more transparent in its meaning and structure.

A more complex orchestration of destructive impulses can be seen in the acts of homicidal cruelty of a sexual delinquent.

As an illustration: many years later and in a different setting, I was able to study a man whom we had to diagnose as a paranoid schizophrenic but who, apart from his crimes, had led a respectable existence as a good family man and as a solid bread winner. As another aspect of his Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde existence, he went prowling at night, assaulted lonely women, stabbed them to death, and raped them.

It appeared that in his hapless victims he was symbolically destroying his mother who had frustrated him in many ways in his childhood. She drank heavily and apparently went through psychotic episodes, abandoning the little boy to the care of a cruel, sadistic father. It was from him that the little boy absorbed the wrath which he then directed at his victims as the innocent maternal substitutes. In this, too, he was

following the pattern of his father, who had mistreated the mother, trying to "reform" her and punishing her by measures of sadistic cruelty. Obviously, the boy was not exempt from these ministrations.

The characteristic split in the personality of this man, which allowed him to lead his double existence, with his crime remaining undetected for a long time, points to schizophrenia, a term introduced by Bleuler and derived from the Greek word for splitting. The lack of emotional reaction to his crime, complete absence of feelings of regret or guilt, points to another important trend, namely to the dynamic weakness of the superego.

This latter characteristic is shared by some schizophrenics with a large group of psychopaths who provide us with numerous examples of crimes of violence.

In classic psychiatry these psychopaths were said to have moral insanity, a term introduced by William B. Pritchard. Today this illness is described under various names, among them moral agnosia or moral imbecility. It is related on the one hand to psychopathy, on the other to the group of schizophrenias.

What all individuals thus affected have in common is the lack of empathy with other human beings: they lack the basic ability for identification that is the foundation of the social and human bond. In a progressing schizophrenic process this defect may precede by a long range the emergence of any other symptoms. Hence a particularly brutal crime of violence, committed against a close friend or relative, strikes even the closest environment like lightning.

It seems that in a time of general unrest, with its weakening of religious and moral norms in the group climate of alienation, such crimes are on the increase. This appalling phenomenon would require a much deeper and broader sociological and psychopathological analysis than we can offer in this place and at this moment. Suffice it to say that in our contemporary social climate certain psychopaths find encouragement and stimulation that trigger their reactions and even provide certain rationalizations.

I must mention here that in the epileptoid group and in the so-called driven psychopath the charge of primitive violence is particularly heavy, while the dynamic weakness of inhibitions and the low threshold of stimulation provide for an easy discharge of violence. Unfortunately, the very same individuals are inclined to use narcotics and stimulants

which, in addition to alcohol, help the dynamic shift toward uncontrolled instinctual discharge.

Absorption of violence from a hostile, often psychopathic parent who, by his harsh and cruel handling of the child, has exposed him to endless frustrations and humiliations, may lead to the development of an individual imbued with wrath and emanating hatred. Given some personal magnetism and a favorable historical and sociopolitical situation, such an individual may grow to become a political leader who will satisfy his sadistic impulses and his lust for power under the guise of fanatic ideology. I have given a detailed analysis of such leaders in my studies of some past and recent dictators. The sinister figures of the latter have cast a dark shadow over the last decades of our history.⁶

Analysis of dictators has demonstrated in their personality makeup one element of great importance that they share with many other persons inclined to the use and promotion of violence: intense narcissism. Overemphasis on one's own ego leads to great vulnerability, with exaggerated reactions to real or imaginary frustrations, humiliations, or slights. On the primitive level of functioning these reactions manifest themselves above all in anger, culminating at times in rage and violence.

Many other factors may contribute to such aggressive hyperactivity. As an example of the complexity involved let me mention the importance of the impairment of the physical or psychological functioning. An ego whose "effectance" is seriously impaired is naturally limited in its opportunities for gratification and discharge of socially acceptable aggression.⁷

If, as an example, we take a boy handicapped by infantile or spastic paralysis, or by limited intellectual abilities, it is easy to see that his occasions for frustration are much more numerous than for his contemporaries not having such handicaps.

It is also evident that severe economic deprivations that affect the essential human needs contribute substantially to the increase and violent discharge of destructive aggression. John B. Watson, creator of the behavioristic system of psychology, said that "hampering of bodily movement brings out the series of responses we call rage." It is clear that this statement should be taken in more than a literary sense.⁸

All these data gathered from observations of individual pathology,

especially from the study of aggressive delinquents, can be easily applied to the flare-up of group violence among the underprivileged and oppressed minority groups.

Since we are a group of physicians gathered here to pay tribute to the memory of an illustrious colleague, we should consider the problem of aggression in a biological and evolutionary perspective. Such a point of view may offer an outlook for the future.

In the animal world, aggression serves above all the instinct for self-preservation. In Spinoza's words "every creature wants to persevere in its existence." Thus, aggression secures the acquisition of food and the defense of the territory, yet this aggression has nothing in common with the sadistic cruelty that we encounter in man. Cruelty does not belong to the essence of the predator, as poignantly illustrated in an Indian tale about a tiger cub brought up by goats. After a happy childhood as a goat he is reminded by an adult tiger of his true essence. As Konrad Lorenz, one of the leading ethologists of our time, puts it: "The lion in the dramatic moment before the leap on his prey is by no means angry."

The aggressive drive plays also a most significant part in the preservation of the species. Animal studies show in a most impressive way the intricate interweaving of "love" and "strife" in an infinite variety of ingenious ritualized patterns of courtship, friendship, and fighting ceremonies. Lorenz, who has devoted a recent book to the study of aggression in the animal world, has shown that the social bond and the bond of friendship are based on evolutionary overcoming of original hostility. Aggression, which originally served to achieve the mastery of the female and to frighten away rivals, when inhibited becomes transmuted into protective domination of the female and of the offspring. According to Lorenz: "We find a personal bond, an individual friendship only in animals with highly developed intraspecific aggression; this bond is the stronger the more aggressive the respective animal species."

In summing up his phylogenetic considerations Lorenz says: "The intraspecific aggression is millions of years older than personal friendship and love. There exists, to be sure, intraspecific aggression without its counterpart (love) but, conversely, there is no love without aggression."⁹

While this evolutionary point of view offers some perspectives and

hopes for the overcoming of intraspecific aggression in man, ethological studies offer eloquent analogies for the understanding of the psychopathology of individual and social aggression.

The changes in homeostasis, that is, in the emotional balance of relationships within an animal group can trigger the increased release of intraspecific aggression. This is especially conspicuous when natural (or experimental) conditions interfere with the normal outlets of the aggressive instinct. In such a case the aggression can easily turn against the members of one's own group or even nearest family.

A most suggestive analogy with human groups is provided by the intense hostility of some animal groups towards the outsider of the same species. A member of a rat colony, for instance, may become an object of hostility and rapid destruction after he has been put for a few days in a different rat colony or simply been rubbed with the soil of another group. The implications for human sociology or, rather, pathology are too obvious to be emphasized.

In man the process of socialization implies the curbing and domestication of instincts. These inevitable frustrations lead, in the last analysis, to what Freud described as discontent of civilization.¹⁰ They are a source of psychic tension both within the individual as well as within the social group.

In the course of evolution the orchestration of basic instinctual impulses became infinitely complex as a result of symbolic implications and the creation of codes and powerful systems of values.

The eruption of violence is predicated upon changes in the intensity of all the variables responsible for the control and the socialization of the aggressive drive.

Here belongs love as the most powerful antidote against hate; the gratification of basic vital needs; economic security and political balance; ability to form and to maintain the social bond based on sympathy and empathy with fellow men; and, finally, in a general sense of the meaning and value of human existence.

In conclusion we must ask: Would it be really too optimistic to hope that with our increased insight into the mainsprings of human behavior and with the technological advances that should make secure all the basic needs of man, we might learn to control and discipline the urge for destruction and violence? Obviously prevention and education should be our primary goals here. This brief survey of the complex

problems involved seems to offer clear if not easy guidelines. After all we belong to a profession whose essence is always to hope and never to give up. In this we are truly human.

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